

STEVEN E. LINDQUIST

One Yājñavalkya... Two?
On the (Questionable) Historicity of a Literary Figure

Yājñavalkya is a popular figure within the Hindu tradition, both because of his association with key Hindu doctrines such as *karma*, rebirth, and the relationship of *ātman* and *brahman*, but also because of the “liveliness” of his persona found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB) and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BĀU). His importance within the academic tradition is central in the reconstruction of early Indian religious and philosophical history. While the Hindu tradition has generally assumed the historical veracity of this figure across the literature, a principal concern of scholarship has been to determine when he may have lived and what doctrines or ideas are historically attributable to this specific individual. A general assumption of scholarship has been that there is a “historical core” to this figure which has been progressively elaborated in the tradition into legend or myth (cf. Bronkhorst 2000, 2007; Fišer 1984; Horsch 1966; Ruben 1947; Witzel 2003).¹ A principal intellectual problem for such scholars then has been determining where history ends and legend begins or, to put it another way, whether there is one, two, or more Yājñavalkyas.

The significance of identifying the historical period of Yājñavalkya is partially due to the importance placed on the dating of the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama. Based on inscriptions commissioned by Aśoka Maurya, we are able to estimate, with a relative degree of reliability, a rough time period for the life of the Buddha. It is universally agreed that the Buddha lived for eighty

¹ Recent exceptions to this view include Black (2007) and Lindquist (2008, forthcoming a & b).

years, but precisely which eighty years is open to debate.² It would not be an understatement to say that the dating of Siddhārtha Gautama is the basic benchmark for dating all other literature in early Indian history. As is well known, the dating of early Sanskrit literature is principally dated based on comparative linguistics to construct a relative chronology of texts. While comparison with the Avestan materials allows for a rough *terminus post quem* of the earliest Vedic material, without a relatively firm date for the Buddha, the relative chronology of other early literature would be without an anchor.

For the purposes of Upaniṣadic scholarship, the importance of the date of the historical Buddha is principally to determine whether certain Upaniṣadic texts or doctrines are contemporaneous with or fall before or after the historical Buddha. Once this is determined, comparative linguistics and comparative literary analysis is used to further fine tune the relative distance from his lifetime.³ A fairly straightforward way to attempt this is by analyzing whether an Upaniṣadic text seems aware of certain Buddhist concepts or terms and to what degree; this can then be compared to other dating schemes within Buddhist studies. This is clearly an imprecise science as no early Upaniṣad mentions Buddhism directly and there is a significant amount of “reading between the lines.” There is also the possibility that Upaniṣadic composers intentionally avoid direct mention of Buddhist concepts and terms, even if they are familiar with them.

Such dating, in general, is complicated because it is always predicated on the dating of something else, which is further predicated on similar educated guesses. As Olivelle has noted, dating individual Upaniṣads with more precision than a couple centuries “is as stable as a house of cards” (Olivelle 1998: 12). At least, though, a date for the Buddha gives a rough basis from which to begin.

The point of this article is not to argue that the search for more precise dates of Yājñavalkya is without merit, particularly in the broad, but it is the argument of this paper to point out that recent attempts to do so have had only very limited interpretive success. Further, I suggest, there are fruitful avenues in approaching Yājñavalkya and other such figures as literary objects, rather

² Though the debate generally focuses on specific dating, the argument that Siddhārtha Gautama as we know him is wholly legendary occasionally appears. Buddhologists, though, have generally assumed the historicity of the Buddha and the debate over the exact dates for him is confined to about a two hundred year period (see the extensive bibliography in Bechert 1991).

³ To a degree, archeological evidence can also aid in anchoring such texts (e.g., Bechert’s 1981 study of the Buddha in comparison with Erdosy’s 1993 archaeological analysis). Such mutually reinforcing types of evidence, particularly when both types of evidence are sparse, come with their own limitations since independent verification of interpretation is difficult, if not often impossible.

than as historical agents, and that such studies may be necessary precursors to attempting more specific dating. Such literary studies in biblical scholarship are fairly common and there are similar approaches employed in later Sanskrit literature, such as the epics and Purāṇas.⁴ However, such an approach is all too rare in Vedic and late-Vedic material.⁵

Much of the scholarship on Yājñavalkya has been focused on determining what can be historically situated in these narratives, particularly in regards to what is indicative of an actual person. From this core, then, scholars hypothesize, sometimes implicitly, how certain narrative elements that strike them as fantastic, mythic, or ahistorical accumulate onto this core. At the center of this methodological approach is the notion that a text can reflect an “authentic” person—one which is historically verifiable and original.⁶ In the case of Yājñavalkya, like certain other literary figures, the situation is complicated because authorship, person, and literary object are intertwined. In the case of Yājñavalkya and the texts ascribed to him we are put into an interpretive circle—the proclaimed “author” of some of our texts is also the principal subject.⁷ Even if we do not accept the traditional ascription of authorship, and historically there is good reason not to, the search for an “authentic” person and “authentic” text cannot be separated.

Recent Approaches to Yājñavalkya

I will take two recent works (Fišer 1984; Witzel 2003) which, in varying degrees and with different levels of sophistication, make claims about a “real” Yājñavalkya. Further, each posits reasons (the one implicitly and the other more explicitly) why the portrayal of Yājñavalkya should or should not be thought of as “authentic” in different parts of the early literature. In this paper, I am not arguing for a particular historical view of Yājñavalkya as much as I am using this as a platform to discuss the problems of correlating a historical person with narrative within the confines of the early material. I will then argue why it can be important and useful to avoid the entire question of a “real” Yājñavalkya altogether. As such, I suggest, we can

⁴ For example, in epic studies of figures such as Arjuna (Katz 1989) and Vyāsa (Sullivan 1999).

⁵ One reason for this is that later material is dominated by stories, and thus more generally accepted as “myth” or “legend” that makes it more often the object of literary (instead of historical) analysis. It is, however, this notion that “story” somehow perverts history that has dominated our understanding of Yājñavalkya and casts suspicion on any form of story (see below). A notable exception to this trend is a forthcoming issue of *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* devoted to a literary analysis of characters in early South Asia, notably Saunaka, Yājñavalkya, Mahāvira, and the Buddha, among others.

⁶ “Authenticity” can also denote a value judgment, suggesting that an “authentic” text or person is proper, warranted, or worthy of the value placed in it by the tradition.

⁷ The White YV, ŚB, and YS, though not the MBh or Purāṇic accounts.

view the Yājñavalkya narratives as reflective of tradition through time and thus develop a more sophisticated understanding of late-Vedic narrative. By not viewing Yājñavalkya directly as a historical agent, but by using Yājñavalkya and the narratives as *a means* to uncover a literary and cultural history, we may be in a better position to develop a more sophisticated approach to the historicity of this literary figure.

Both Fišer and Witzel have argued for a “real” Yājñavalkya within the early literature, but have come to conclusions that are quite different from each other. In brief, for Fišer the “real” Yājñavalkya is the figure who appears in the earliest material, books 1-5 of the ŚB, while for Witzel, the historical Yājñavalkya is the figure found throughout the ŚB and BĀU. While both scholars have significantly advanced our understanding of this material and the figure of Yājñavalkya, I contend that neither view of a historical individual is persuasive. I will discuss the methodological and interpretive problems that I find in their endeavors, not to propose my own alternative history of Yājñavalkya, but with the goal of complicating the relationship of text and history surrounding one figure.

Fišer

Ivo Fišer (1984), in his study of Yājñavalkya, is one of the few scholars who attempts to take the “personality” of Yājñavalkya seriously as a criteria for determining his historicity.⁸ Like others, however, Fišer’s goal is to demarcate a “real” (versus “legendary”) Yājñavalkya in the late-Vedic material. As is well known, Yājñavalkya first appears in the ŚB as a figure whose authority is referred to on several ritual matters. In the early books of the ŚB (books 1-5), Yājñavalkya’s name usually appears in a list of opinions on a particular matter. In many, but not all cases, his name appears at the end and his position is taken as authoritative.⁹ Fišer is careful to distinguish authoritative passages from certain passages where Yājñavalkya’s opinion is in question or contrary to tradition. The later books of ŚB follow a similar pattern, but here the passages in question become more detailed and sometimes contain very short narratives (and, in one case, a longer narrative) rather than singular pronouncements.

In contrast, BĀU chapters 3-4 is a clustered set of stories bound into a unit by the figure of Yājñavalkya and is known traditionally as the *Yājñavalkyakāṇḍa*. Chapter 3 is the famous debate at Janaka’s court, where Yājñavalkya bests eight interlocutors. Chapter 4 contains three “Janaka stories,” where Yājñavalkya discusses various phil-

⁸ Cf. also Renou (1948).

⁹ For an extensive discussion of each passage in the ŚB where Yājñavalkya appears, see Lindquist (forthcoming a).

osophical matters with the famous King of Videha and this chapter concludes with a dialogue between Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī.¹⁰

Fišer's criteria for distinguishing the "real" Yājñavalkya from a legendary one is never clearly argued in his work, but his consistent use of such a distinction suggests two main criteria: (1) the change of narrative forms found between the ŚB books and the BĀU (including the longer narratives in ŚB book 11) and (2) the particularities of language usage in the text, specifically the words attributed to Yājñavalkya (1984: 60-61). In the first case, Fišer is neither explicit about what those changes in form are nor when a line is crossed into ahistorical narrative. However, it is clear that to him a line has been crossed.

After discussing the role of Yājñavalkya's authority in the ŚB, Fišer (1984: 60) states

The gap between Yājñavalkya's quotations in the ŚB, and those preserved in BU [BĀU], is a significant feature of Yājñavalkya's 'biography'.

This, of course, cannot be denied, but the significance and role of this "gap" is never explored in detail. Instead, Fišer repeatedly makes claims about the ahistorical nature of ŚB 11 and the BĀU (1984: 70):

The material contained in Book 11 of ŚB, and the corresponding passages in JB [*Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*], might be characterized as the birth of the Yājñavalkya legend, i.e. it represents a transition from the isolated and impersonal remembrances to the 'classical' record of BU [BĀU], full of previously unknown details. Yet, it was the stories of King Janaka of Videha and his disputes with Yājñavalkya and other brahmanic teachers which captivated the imagination and almost caused plain facts to fall into oblivion.

and

Yājñavalkya's encounters with Janaka are of no real historical relevance...

In both cases, Fišer does not go into the details of his claims, details which he sees as either unnecessary or extraneous.¹¹ In one sense, this is a strange move on his part as these details are fundamental to his argument about the historicity of the early Yājñavalkya. In another sense, though, it seems that Fišer takes the ahistorical nature of the later Yājñavalkya as so obvious that it only needs cursory men-

¹⁰ BĀU 4.1 and 4.2 can be read as a linear set or independently, whereas 4.3-4 and 4.5 are clearly separate narratives. There are good reasons, however, to see the whole of BĀU 3-4 as a literary unit, where each narrative thematically and structurally builds off of the preceding ones (Lindquist forthcoming a).

¹¹ Cf. Fišer 1984: 60 & 70.

tion. Fišer's criteria for the "legendary" status of the later material seems based on the fact that the form of the passages has changed, coupled with his own subjective notion that these stories *simply cannot be true*. Further, Fišer seems to take *any narrative* as inherently ahistorical. Regarding BĀU, he states (p. 77) that

... [t]here is neither logical sequence in the arrangement of the disputes, nor is Yājñavalkya presented as a historical figure. The contents of the discussions and the gradation of the importance of the ideas expressed in them obviously determined the arrangement of the dialogues in which Yājñavalkya is conceived as a great sage of the past, beyond the reach of memory, who is an undisputed authority.¹²

How exactly Yājñavalkya can be "presented as a historical figure" according to Fišer is unclear. Fišer's own language, however, is suggestive: "impersonal" and "isolated" (1984: 70) statements, presumably here meaning the short pronouncements found in the ŚB, carry historical weight whereas narrative (ŚB 11 and BĀU) is questionable or dismissed.

A series of subjective reader-response type interpretations pepper the rest of Fišer's article. Presumably, the debate in BĀU 3 up until the questions from the lone female, Gārgī, is "monotonous" (p. 78). Gārgī appears twice in the narrative and the second instance is an "incongruous interpolation" (p. 79) which is "unusually pompous" (p. 80). Yājñavalkya treats Śākalya, his final interlocutor in the debate, "exceptionally haughtily" (p. 80).¹³ The composers of BĀU, according to Fišer, are showing Yājñavalkya's absolute authority out of "zeal" and ascribe "rather unnecessarily boastful words" to him (p. 81). Fišer concludes by stating that the dialogue between Yājñavalkya and his wife (4.5) as well as the lineage (*vaṃśa*) that concludes the text (4.6) must also be completely "legendary" (p. 83ff.).

Fišer is direct in that he sees the BĀU as "legendary," even if his criteria for saying so is more opaque. This directness, though, more pointedly indicates the problems with his position. First, there are several basic questions that must be addressed in distinguishing factual versus non-factual narrative: when is a narrative a "legend" instead of a historical narrative? How does a text present someone, to use Fišer's words (p. 77), as "a historical figure" and how does it not? There is nothing in this text that could not, at least in theory, be historical (such as clearly impossible situations or miraculous events), so why are narratives dismissed as ahistorical?

¹² Fišer's claim that there is no "logical sequence" in the debates and that the episodes are arranged as a gradation of discourse is obviously contradictory. In fact, as I argue elsewhere (Lindquist forthcoming a), there is a very specific and complicated logical sequence in this text, but that arrangement does not necessarily prove that what is said by the individuals is not historically accurate.

¹³ On Śākalya's role in this text, see Lindquist (forthcoming b).

What seems to trouble Fišer is narrative itself—extended interactions between characters and contexts that take on formal features of storytelling (e.g., framing, character development, thematic continuity, or foreshadowing). But at what point are narrative structures and devices a signal that a narrative is ahistorical? Are we to define “legend” based on the accumulation of narrative structures and devices in a text? How many of these devices constitute a “legend?” One? Two? A dozen? Are certain devices (such as a “gradation” of ideas) to be weighted more heavily as indicative of legend? It is true that the nature of some passages in ŚB 11 and BĀU have changed—they are proper narratives, rather than singular pronouncements—but why should a genre shift indicate a shift away from history? Must historical remembrance be a simple listing of facts, one that is “impersonal” and “isolated?” Such questions are not rhetorical, but rather they are fundamental if we wish to avoid idiosyncratic reader-responses based solely on subjective impressions.

While Fišer discusses Yājñavalkya’s character, especially his sarcastic persona, he uses this trait in an attempt to attribute a motive (“zeal”) to the author of BĀU and to dismiss this portrayal of Yājñavalkya. As I have shown elsewhere (Lindquist forthcoming a), there is a historical development of Yājñavalkya’s sarcasm across texts and it has different effects in different contexts. Attributing this development to the “zeal” of the composer or seeing it as unnecessary or superfluous literary flair ignores *what* the texts are saying, the *reasons* they are saying it, and *how* they are saying it. These are precisely the questions that need to be addressed. While there is a development and increase across texts in the sarcasm attributed to Yājñavalkya, this could simply be because a shift from pronouncements to longer narratives allows for more opportunities. Further, an increase in Yājñavalkya’s apparent authority across these texts can be more simply explained as a “rise to authority” of a figure within a literary tradition that *may or may not* correlate with a historical human individual. As far as I can tell, there is no definitive way to tell the difference between historically accurate remembrance or literary fantasy in these texts. Formal narrative structures and devices are signs of good storytelling, rather than historical inaccuracy.

Finally, Fišer also suggests that the language used in the texts helps in determining the historical veracity of the figure portrayed. In particular, he states repeatedly that the existence of *hapax legomena* in the BĀU shows that the Yājñavalkya portrayed in the BĀU is not connected directly to the Yājñavalkya of the ŚB. Fišer’s argument is that the continued use of *hapax* in the BĀU indicates the linguistic needs of a newer tradition, needing new linguistic forms for their doctrines that are then placed into the mouth of an established mythical figure for authority.

The logic in this argument is highly specious. The use of *hapaxes*, as far as I can see, has nothing to do with distancing the BĀU from

the ŚB accounts. Fišer himself points to *hapaxes* in both the ŚB and BĀU (suggesting similarity, rather than difference, between the texts). As Witzel (2003: 125ff.) has shown, the use of *hapaxes* and novel compounded forms could equally indicate that the text is portraying a single historical Yājñavalkya using a “personalized speech” and is not a “legendary” attribution of speech and ideas to a revered mythical figure.¹⁴

In any event, if Fišer wants us to see *hapaxes* in BĀU as indicating that the Yājñavalkya of BĀU is fundamentally distinct from the Yājñavalkya of ŚB, logic would require us to view *anything* in BĀU not prefigured in the ŚB to be a new and unconnected innovation. Such a view requires a strict consistency between texts, patently at odds with even a highly-evolved oral literature. More problematic is that such a view asks us to take a text (or part of a text) as a closed unit, rather than as a textual instantiation of a dynamic cultural milieu that historically changes.

Witzel

While Fišer argues for a fundamental historical disconnect between an early (historical) Yājñavalkya in the ŚB and a later (legendary) one in ŚB 11 and BĀU, Witzel (2003) argues that Yājñavalkya’s portrayal across these texts is indicative of a single historical individual. Witzel’s approach is novel, even if it is not necessarily more compelling than Fišer’s. His argument is based on two criteria—that the portrayal of the character of Yājñavalkya is relatively consistent across the texts and that there is similarity in speech-use that suggests, to Witzel, a “personalized speech” of a single individual. In this way, Witzel’s focus on language and personality parallels Fišer, but he does not take a change in narrative form across texts as indicative of a change in the historical veracity of the figure.

It should also be noted that the ‘different’ types of Yājñavalkyas appearing in the early part of ŚB (1-5) and the later one (ŚB 11-13) are due to the content of the texts, not to a difference in personality. The later parts deal with additional material and discuss it in a more speculative way, often in form of dialogues (*brahmodya*), than the ritualistic sections in ŚB 1-5. (2003: 106)

Witzel extends this to include the BĀU, taking into account its more “mystical” context. As such, Witzel takes Yājñavalkya to be a complex individual who is simultaneously a ritual specialist, a Upaniṣadic thinker, and even a mystic on certain occasions. This portrayal of Yājñavalkya is more compelling since it is more sensi-

¹⁴ However, there are logical problems with this argument as well (see below).

tive to concerns of genre and, from a historical point of view, that individuals themselves are not one-dimensional.

While I agree that there are a number of means by which the pronouncements and the narratives of Yājñavalkya attempt consistency, particularly with regards to Yājñavalkya's personality, the general topic matter, etc., there is a significant problem in accepting Witzel's suggestion that consistency suggests "historical fact." Religious narratives centered on a literary individual would favor consistency as consistency creates a continuity between literary portrayals. As such, if there was not an attempt at a certain consistency, a listening audience would not find such a narrative compelling or "believable."¹⁵

Of course, the need and degree of consistency varies case by case based on a number of factors—the degree of reverence a text or person may have or may strive for, the historical needs at the time for a particular group and how those needs may be embodied in a narrative, or the ideological position of a particular genre. This is not to say that such literary portrayals are universally consistent or that they may not be intentionally inconsistent (particularly when an inconsistency is a theme in the narrative). Indeed, the complex history of the oral transmission of early Sanskrit literature means that a certain inconsistency is to be expected. This does not mean that innovation does not happen at all or happen often, but rather when that innovation is put into the context of an established authority (which Yājñavalkya is, *even in the early ŚB*), it is likely to be "naturalized" within the discourse by connecting that innovation to already established tropes, themes, personalities, and doctrine.¹⁶ In this sense, particularly when narratives are centered around a personality, a certain consistency or "cultural logic" is employed to make such personalities historically and culturally believable. Even in the case where such literary figures seem radically removed from a particular context, a consistency is still often attempted if it is culturally thought necessary. In this light, one could see the early Yājñavalkya pronouncements/stories as forming a "template" of Yājñavalkya's personality which is later employed, manipulated, and even modified according to the needs of a particular community at a particular time.¹⁷

¹⁵ I have argued elsewhere (Lindquist forthcoming a) that in one particular portrayal of Yājñavalkya in the MBh book 12 what defines Yājñavalkya as a literary character has all but disappeared. In that case, the passage is immediately followed by the first extended hagiography of how Yājñavalkya received the White Yajurveda from the Sun. This narrative is tacked on, I argue, precisely because it fills in the possible gap of associating this figure with his literary past.

¹⁶ This, of course, does not mean we cannot notice particular innovations within a tradition nor that "naturalization" is necessarily absolute, but that the degree of "naturalizing" innovation must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. On one particular literary innovation in the BĀU, see Lindquist (forthcoming b).

¹⁷ But this does not mean in the early texts that the teachings themselves are necessarily of one person or not, only that the form of the narrative is constructed in a way to serve certain ends.

Witzel further argues that the speech attributed to Yājñavalkya is indicative of a single personality that binds the different literary portrayals together. For example, he notes parallels in the fashion that Yājñavalkya dismisses other ritual interpretations other than his own (2003: 119-121) or his view of himself and Brahmins as a group (2003: 121-123). In doing so, Yājñavalkya can be seen as a compelling figure, both to scholars and to those within the Hindu tradition.

But how does one demarcate such speech as a personal language in these texts? In a fashion opposite of Fišer, Witzel (2003: 124ff.) argues that the continuous use of *hapax*, the use of old words in new ways (particularly in constructing novel compounds), and the repeated use of *svid* and *evāham* in his discourses indicate that Yājñavalkya is a single historical person in the ŚB and the BĀU. He also points out that many of Yājñavalkya's statements are witty, straightforward, almost common-sense responses and that such consistency of his speech across the ŚB and BĀU points to a single, historical individual.

Witzel's attempt at demarcating a "personal language" is the most novel approach to Yājñavalkya's historicity to date, but it again raises a series of problems that must be addressed before it can be taken in any way as conclusive. First and foremost, while Fišer's argument is marred by not distinguishing "legend" from "history" in narratives, Witzel similarly does not draw a distinction between "individual" and "shared" speech. Is it even possible or desirable to speak of such categories within the limited number of stories we have of Yājñavalkya? What of others' speech within the same or related texts? How can Witzel demarcate *an individual's* speech, if he does not do so with the speech of others in the same texts, as a form of counterpoint?¹⁸

Another problem, not dissimilar to those mentioned above, is how do we theoretically and practically demarcate individualized speech and stereotyped speech? Since Yājñavalkya appears rather unique in the Vedic sources for his provocative statements and his irreverent personality, it is equally likely that Yājñavalkya himself became a template, even quite early, for a tradition that needed a particular type of spokesman to promulgate and legitimize newly emerging ideas in contestation with other established traditions. In this way, it is equally possible that the tradition at the time had a stereotyped notion of Yājñavalkya and the way that he was thought to talk. Certainly, a stereotyped notion of "his" speech could easily be imitated in other stories.

Further, as Witzel himself acknowledges, a detailed analysis of other teachers' speech of and around this time period would need

¹⁸ Witzel himself suggests that this needs to be carried out, yet still draws the conclusion that, for example in BĀU 4.3 Yājñavalkya's "...way of expression is a very *personal* one, fit for this quasi mystical chapter" (2003: 132; italics original).

to be carried out, but it is again unclear how such data could be used to isolate a historical person from a narrative tradition by means of the words employed. For example, Witzel argues (2003: 124-125) that *svid* and *evāham* are common in the speech that is attributed to Yājñavalkya. However, as Thompson (1997: 30ff.) has shown, *svid* is used more than 40 times in the *R̥gveda* and at least 12 of those appear to be in *brahmodya*-like or riddling settings.¹⁹ While *svid* itself does not necessarily mark an interrogative statement (though it often goes along with them), it does, according to Thompson, function “to mark the passage in which it occurs as emphatic, i.e., marked, charged, or of special significance” (1997: 30). Thompson contends that *svid* is probably commonly used in *brahmodya*-like settings because it “suggests that *brahmodyas* are perceived to be a form of charged discourse” (1997: 30), which is certainly the case with Yājñavalkya in the BĀU. The dramatic rise in the use of *svid* that Witzel points out from the early ŚB, to the later ŚB, to the BĀU can easily be explained by the fact that it is in the later books that we are more often faced with the context of *brahmodyas*. Even in the BĀU, there are others who use the particle and it is not limited to Yājñavalkya (BĀU 3.1.1 by Janaka; BĀU 3.2.10 by Jāratkārava Ārtabhāga)—so how, then, is it personal? It is important to note that in all cases in the *Yājñavalkyakāṇḍa*, *svid* is used in interrogative sentences (rhetorically at 3.9.17) and Yājñavalkya only uses the particle in two situations—in insulting Śākalya (3.9.17) and multiple times in his final question/riddle to the assembled Brahmins (3.9.28). The particle does not appear to be used outside of the *brahmodya*-setting at all (i.e., in BĀU 4).²⁰

While Witzel has put forth the most detailed study of Yājñavalkya, and has suggested a novel means to investigate the language attributed to Yājñavalkya, there are questions that need to be addressed if we are to consider “language” as a marker of a personal—and in this case, historical—identity. How can one tell the difference between a community attempting continuity in their literary tradition and an actual, single, historical individual? What criteria are being used to demarcate the language of one person versus the language of others (versus the language of the community that is maintaining these traditions)? While Witzel’s project holds out interesting possibilities, they are, for now, only that.

¹⁹ Thompson also states that there are 10 other suggestive, but less certain, instances (1997: 30).

²⁰ Witzel’s *eva* + *aham* of Yājñavalkya in the ŚB occurs only at BĀU 4.3.20 where Yājñavalkya is describing/imitating someone else’s speech (cf. also Gārgī’s speech at BĀU 3.8.1 which includes *hantāham eva* and, at 3.8.2, *evāham*). Outside of direct speech, *svam eva* at 3.1.2 emphasizes that Yājñavalkya alone (probably indicating arrogance) claims the cows meant for the victor in the debate.

Conclusion

I have, up until this point, critiqued two opposing positions about the historicity of Yājñavalkya in ŚB and BĀU, one which takes only the earliest ŚB material as historical (Fišer) and the other which takes the combined early literature as historical (Witzel). Both have greatly expanded our understanding of Yājñavalkya, particularly in the use of language in this material. However, as I hope I have shown, neither is particularly persuasive in regards to what constitutes a historical figure. I have attempted to illuminate some of the problems that must be addressed should scholars continue the endeavor to demarcate a “real” Yājñavalkya in early Indian literature, particularly if no new literary material comes to light to definitively settle this matter.

None of this has been done with the intention of saying that such historical studies should be abandoned altogether, but it has been done with the intent to show that much more sophisticated theoretical models need to be developed if this sort of inquiry is to bear fruit. In particular, what is necessary is an analysis of how narrative and history are interrelated as well as an explicit discussion about the criteria used to determine if something is historical fact or literary imagination. As I have suggested, neither of these attempts have been able to conclusively demarcate a “real” Yājñavalkya—more often than not, the logic employed to do so can simply be turned on itself or equally compelling interpretive alternatives can be given.

Further, a more sophisticated view of literature must be adopted as regards the notion of “narrativity,” that is the development of structures, themes, and so on that transform simple speech-acts into narratives. Any narrative (whether told for the first time or repeated for generations) takes on formal literary characteristics which do not necessarily say anything about historicity. This is to say something that should in itself be obvious: narrative is ever affected by narrativity. This does not mean that what is being told is historically true or not, but it does mean that the speech is motivated towards various ends and literary characteristics are employed to support those ends. As Roland Barthes (1972) has shown, we are always surrounded by narrativity whether it be in our speech acts, our justice practices, our view of our own individual lives, or in our various cultural productions.

The textual evidence as we have it does not appear to lend itself, as far as I can determine, to drawing an objective line regarding the historicity of Yājñavalkya in the early literature. Clearly by the time of the epics, where, for example, Yājñavalkya is portrayed as simultaneously functioning as the *adhvaryu* priest for Indra in heaven and for Yudhiṣṭhira on earth (MBh II), we have crossed into the realm of literary and religious imagination at least in this particular case. But in the early material, no such sharp line between histori-

cal remembrance and literary imagination exists. By taking a figure like Yājñavalkya as a literary, rather than historical, figure we can move beyond subjective reader-response interpretations about the “authenticity” of a figure and turns towards investigating the literary nature of this figure and the value placed in him by the tradition.

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